

**Social Media and Meme Culture: A study on the impact of Internet Memes in reference
with 'Kudathai Murder Case'**

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Abstract

The 21st century witnessed a tremendous growth of social media in almost every sphere of life. Several social media pages are keen on sarcasm and humour. There are pages which are exclusively dedicated to meme contents. Memes have become an integral part of the netizen vernacular. Trolls and memes are now the primary news source for youths. Memes are being shared from person to person and is now treated as a cultural unit. Kerala, Southern State of India, got a large number of audiences as end receivers for troll memes and also provides a platform for troll makers too. In this light, this paper discusses on how memes portray crime beats and its influence on the digital audience with special reference to 'Kudathai murder case'. The qualitative analysis carried out reveals that trolls and memes played a vital role in moulding public opinion. Thus, the paper tries to find out how memes act as a powerful means of communication that frames general public's opinion on criminal acts that happens in the social domain.

Keywords: Meme culture, Crime beat, digital audience, public opinion

1.1 Introduction

Online trolls and memes have been considered as an important factor that has a major impact on socio-political, lingual and cultural issues. Sarcasm and satirical representation of serious issues are the general nature of trolls and memes but at times it leads to heartless defamation on individuals. Ideas that are disseminated through internet may turn out to be reasons for social transformations and may leads in moulding new perspective in the society.

Kerala is known for its satirical tradition. Indeed, it begins with the primary school reader in which the stories are humorously sardonic. KunchanNambiar who lived in the eighteenth century (1705-1770) is Kerala's most noted satirical writer. His entire work, in satirical verse, has been recited over the years in various dance forms called thullal and he was a true secularist as he ridiculed all communities and all classes, from kings and high priests, to the common citizen (Abraham, 1995).Internet trolls and memes are the newer version of such satires and sarcasm. The innumerable troll and meme groups in Malayalam provide ample evidence for the growth of online satire and virtual attacks. Troll Malayalam, International Chalu Union, ArshabharathaSamskaram, Cyber Trollers etc. are some of the major troll groups in Kerala which has huge followers and this marks the beginning of cyber satires. Kerala, Southern State of India, got a large number of audiences as end receivers for troll memes and also provides a platform for troll makers too. In this light, this paper discusses on how memes portray crime beats and its influence on the digital audience with special reference to 'Kudathai murder case'.

Koodathayi Cyanide Murders were a series of criminal incidents that occurred at Koodathai in Kozhikode district of Kerala. The crimes were investigated in late 2019, involving the mystery of 6 people's murder over a span of 14 years. The murder was one of the criminal cases which drew considerable media and public interest in Kerala, which eventually led to the arrest of the woman named Jolly Joseph. The case also led to a debate on the legal and moral implications. Suddenly Jolly has become the centre of gossips, discussions, legal debates, police explanations, psychological analysis and sociological interpretations all over Kereala.Koodathayi serial killing case has become one of the most complicated and complex case in the history of criminal investigation in Kerala. The serial killing planned and operated by a housewife named Jolly has been the issue of debate and it also takes the much of the time of news channels in the state.

Not only media but also the social media is also anxious about the case. But the troll and memegroups in the social media have been celebrating the news with trolls.

Almost all trolls and memes were about the prime accused Jolly and the tool that she used to execute the murder-Potassium cyanide.

Research Objectives

1. To understand the importance of trolls and memes in social media.
2. To analyse how memes simplifies the coverage of crime beats in reference to Kudathai Murder case.
3. To examine the portrayal of women in memes.

Review of Literature

An attempt is made in this section to present a review of the available studies in the area of internet trolls and memes.

2.1 Trolls and memes as the Source of News:

For centuries humour was used as a tool to communicate a certain idea and change the perception of the audience. Many studies have stated that internet memes are used by state and other forms to convey in converting information (Kulkarni, 2017). Lainesk (2016) stated that digital natives depend and consider memes as a primary source of information. This is because the younger generation tends to read upon the information based on memes made on it.

Modern communication and life centre around virtual social interaction created by the internet network. Netizens receive customised feeds, shared their comment, ideas, reviews through social media platforms, which emerged as the news public sphere where ideas are shaped and opinions are formed democratically and constructively. The Internet has given a platform for 'trollers' to create trolls and memes which could be provoking someone for mutual enjoyment to abusing others for personal pleasure. Studies have shown that memes and troll with image-oriented content which is simple, fast and direct are a more popular form of message among younger dependence(Wolfram, 2019). The anonymity of social media platforms gives the users a safe cocoon to hide their identity and affiliation while generating

contents for the media. Several studies (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Marwick, 2018; Klein, 2018) has shown audience share misinformation generated in social media platforms in the form of trolls, memes and fake news. The deliberate, one-sided opinionated message in a troll makes it political in nature (Philips, 2015).

The study titled “Rogue Cops Among Rogues: Trolls and Trolling in Social Networking Sites” investigated the reason that motivates online users to engage in trolling and meme. The study found that the anonymity and temporary identity suspension online prevalent in some forms of computer-mediated communication, supports a venue for people to “unleash” certain impulses not appropriate in face-to-face interaction (Escartin, 2015)

Vineetha states that International chalu union is the most popular Malayalam troll and meme website in Facebook. She examined how International ChaluUnion (ICU) page in Facebook and the memes generally engaged in social criticisms as this webpage are new space for social satires. ICU (International Chalu Union) is not intentionally introduced to politics. But it has some ideology set ups than basic political correctness. (Vineetha, 2016)

Trolls and meme have become the most modern phenomenon to blow social media networking sites and so far, the most dangerous and prejudicial to young and adults alike. Sites like Facebook, online forums, blogging and newspaper comments have emerged as platform and a stage to harass people with insults, provocations and threatening languages. This leads to huge distress to recipients of following messages. Trolling supporters see this as harmless fun but majority of people it affects deviant from fun. Trolling is a form of inducement online which includes sending abusive comments across all social media platforms. It has another meaning that is which is used for bullying having no matter how we dress it up, it actuates people to make comments to another people that elicit further comments. (Jiffy, 2015)

2.2 Audience Theory and Internet memes:

The user autonomy feature of the internet has changed the way the audience approach the medium. The information on the internet is not dumped down to the audience; instead, the netizens opt for the content they like depending on their need. Application of use and gratification theory (Stafford, et. Al 2004) confirms that the audience is not passive or dependent of media; instead, they choose mass media content to get specific gratification.

However with the internet as a form of mass communication (Morris & Ogan, 1996), the content of internet including news, trolls and memes are shared among mass as by source as a

form of mass communication or interpersonal communication. The two-step flow theory (Lazersfeld, Berelson&Gaudet, 1994) has explained how media literates become the opinion leaders and take lead in diffusing the information to others. Through online trolls, the makers of the troll explore the content and reshape it humorously for their audience.

The magic bullet theory propounded by Harold Lasswell in the 1930s postulates that media injects the message into the minds of its audience and can cause a significant change in their attitude and behaviour (McQuail, 2005). With social media as one of the significant form of human interaction in the internet era magic bullet theory still holds significance with netizens decision of the media platforms and reaction to the content they are exposed to (Nwabueze&Okonkwo, 2018).

The Internet also facilitates users to easily switch to an alternative source of information. Bishop (2014) found that digital natives employ different techniques of trolls and trolling through convey messages and also enjoy their control over the narrative, use and production of message about the society or person.

2.3 Woman, Violence and Representation

Mass media is a tool to create imagery and understanding of the world around us. For centuries women were portrayed as a submissive gender which embodies gentleness and displayed characteristics such as dependent, friendly, delicate in relationships, and for children.

Violence by female offender creates a fascination and hype around the general public and media (Nylor 1990). Nylor argued that women who commit violent crime are portrayed by the media as deviant, as they challenge the stereotype about the nature of the crime as well as the gender association. Women associated with murders and other violent crimes are classified into the categories of 'bad' women or 'sad' women by various. A bad woman had abandoned her gender-role for person gains (Brennan& Vandenberg, 2009, Sasteal, et. Al, 2015). A bad woman is shown to have the masculine feature (Chesney-Lind, 1999), unchaste and sexually deviant (Bond-Maupin, 1998) demonised (Nylor, 2001) and uncivilised (Aderson 2019). Media has portrayed female offenders as materialistic, greedy and revengeful. It creates an unfavourable image which portrays them as less than human narrative and creates a narrative that they deserve punishment.

The other imagery associated with female criminal is within the label of 'sad' woman, who is not completely responsible for their action but is rather a victim of bad circumstances (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009). These women fulfil their gender roles (Bond-Maupin, 1998), keep up their feminine traits and appearance (Nylor, 2001), sexually chaste and adhere to

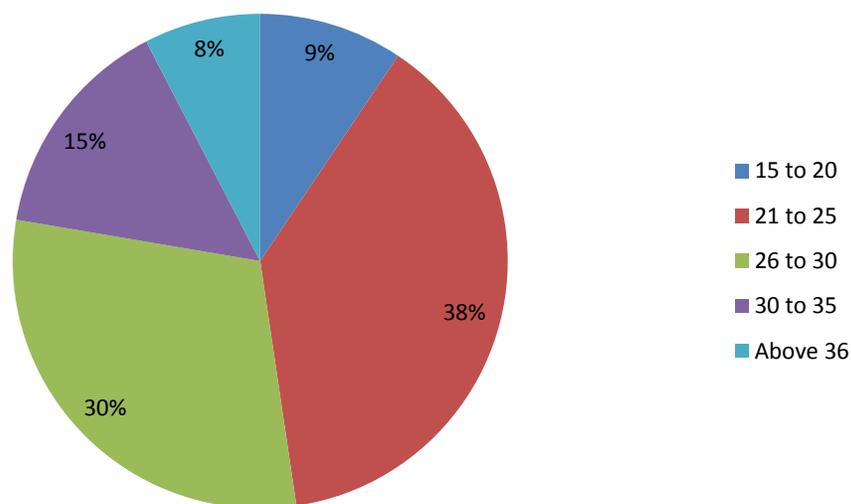
religious values (Huckerby, 2003). Medical or biological conditions of these women are also brought out in the context (Naylor, 2001) to increase audience sympathy to these offenders.

3.1 Methodology

To gain a deeper understanding of the internet memes, this study adopts a qualitative approach using survey method and questionnaire as a tool. To achieve the research objectives, the source of data was obtained from the 170 respondents directly by the survey questionnaire. The respondents were selected using simple random sampling method. The research was an empirical study that used both primary and secondary data. Primary Data required for the study was collected from the respondents. A structured questionnaire was distributed to 170 respondents and responses were collected to analyze their attitude towards Koodathai trolls and memes. The secondary data was collected from the troll pages, memes, newspapers, news websites, and journals. The collected data were analysed using percentage method. The qualitative analysis using survey method gave more insight to the perception of people towards internet memes.

4.1 Data Analysis

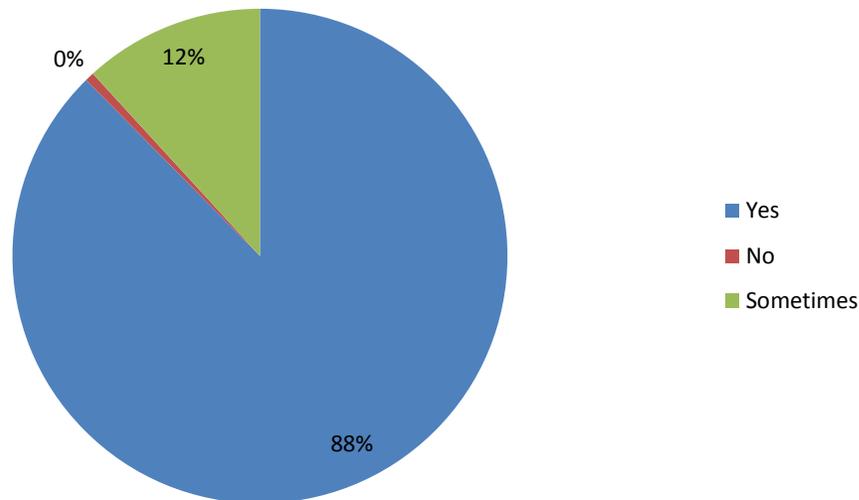
Age group



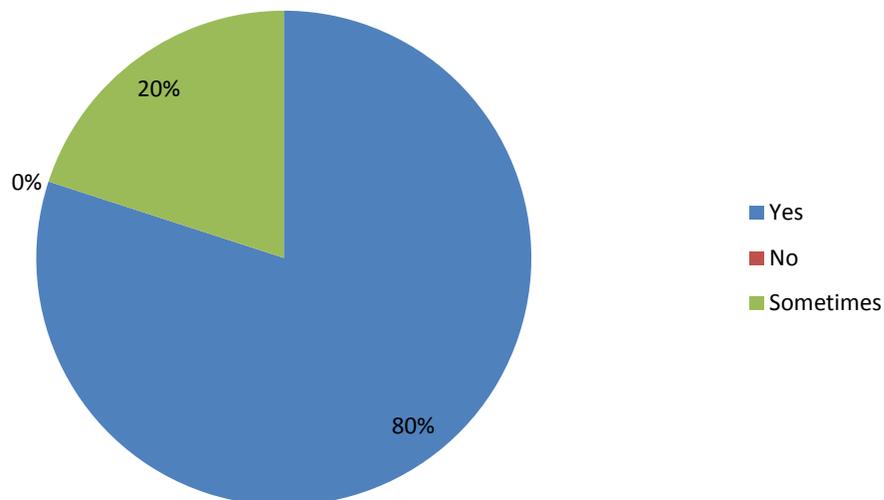
Out of 170 respondents 38 percentage of the population was between the age

categories of 21 to 25 and 30 percentage of the respondents fall under the category of 26-30. Only nine percent of the respondents were below 20 years. 101 respondents of 170 has post graduate and above qualification. Thirty percent of the respondents have completed graduation.

Do you watch trolls and memes?



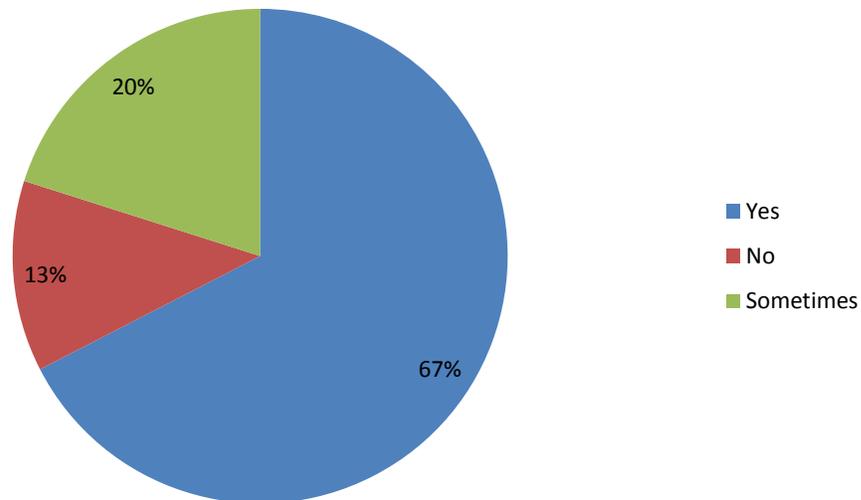
Do you enjoy trolls and memes?



All the respondents were familiar with trolls and memes, with 88 percent watch trolls and memes regularly and 12 percent do it frequently. Out of 170 respondents 80% of the

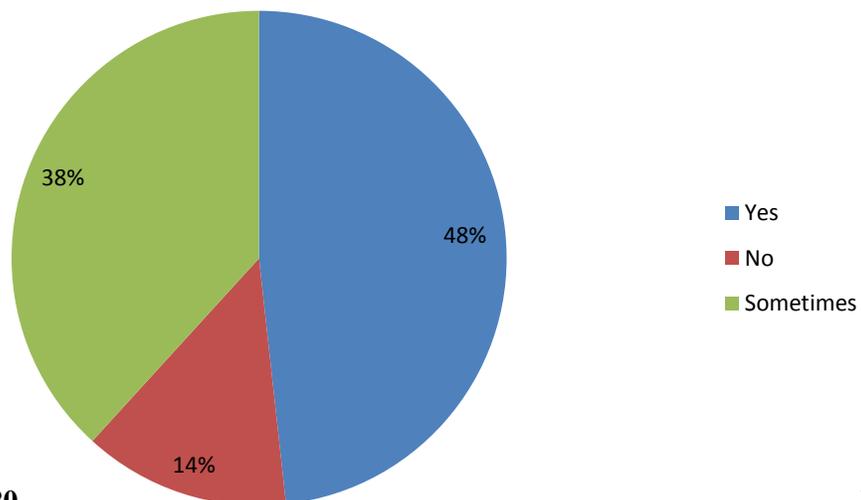
respondents agree that they enjoy troll content and 20 percent responded that enjoy trolls at times.

Are you getting new information from trolls and memes?



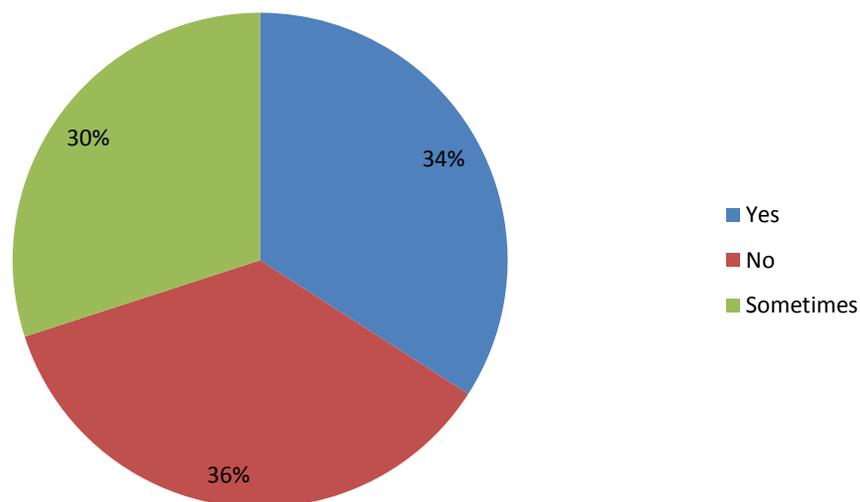
Sixty seven percent of the sample responded that they get new information from trolls and memes, while 13 percent said trolls do not carry new information. Twenty percent of the samples responded that certain time they get new information from trolls.

Do you think trolls and memes are useful?



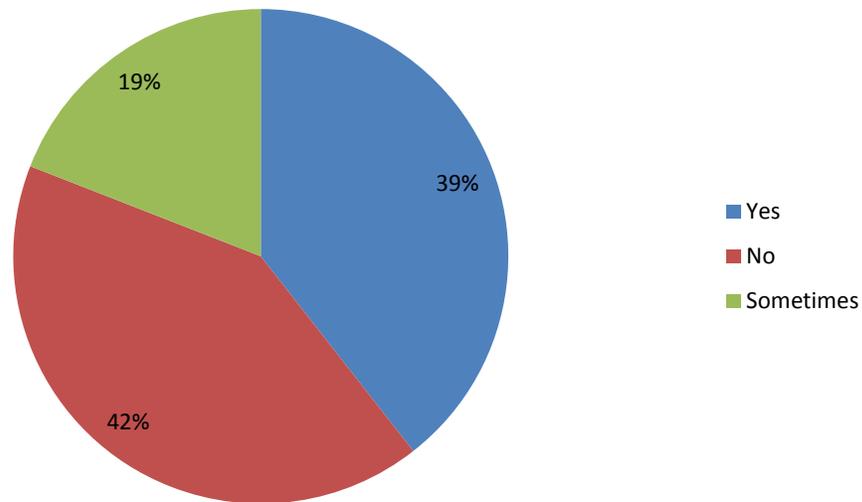
Almost half of the respondents with percentage of 48.2 consider that trolls and memes are useful in some ways. Thirteen percent of the respondents believe that trolls and memes are not useful. The remaining 38.2 percentage of the sample thinks that trolls could be useful at times. Many respondents suggested that trolls and memes help to create awareness about the changing socio-political environment in a humorous manner. The satirical presentations in trolls are helpful to present Critical and alternative perspectives of the realities in the society.

Do troll and meme help to mould your opinion?

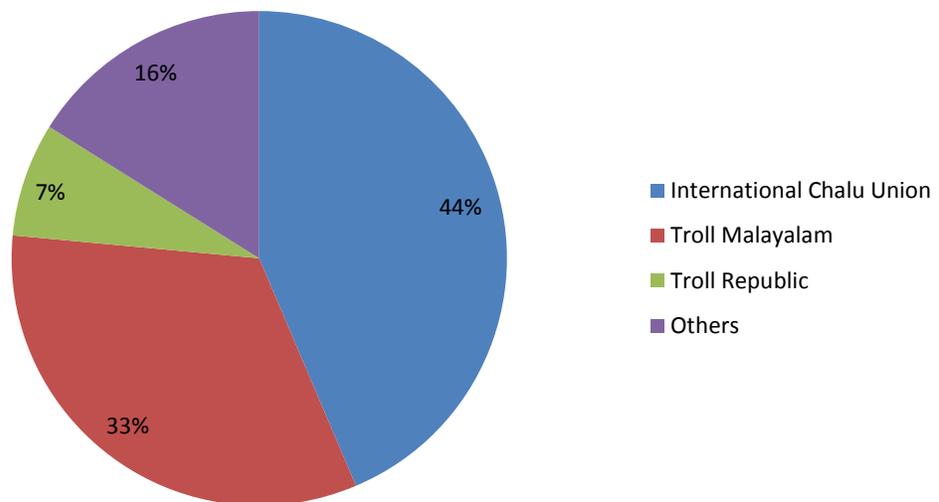


More than one-third of the sample responders (34.1 %) answered that the trolls and memes have the capacity to shape one's opinion. But 35.1% believes that trolls and memes play no role in forming opinion. Other 30% believes that depending on situation trolls could impact on the opinion formation of its audience.

Do you often visit troll and meme pages?



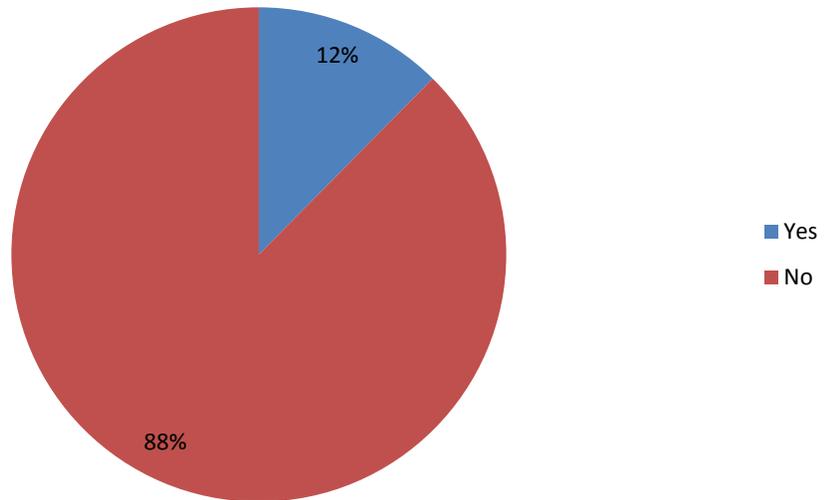
Which of the following troll page you often visit?



The data depicts that 49.4 percent of the respondents do not visit troll pages regularly. Only 34.1 percent of the respondents are the regular visitors of troll and meme content. The most

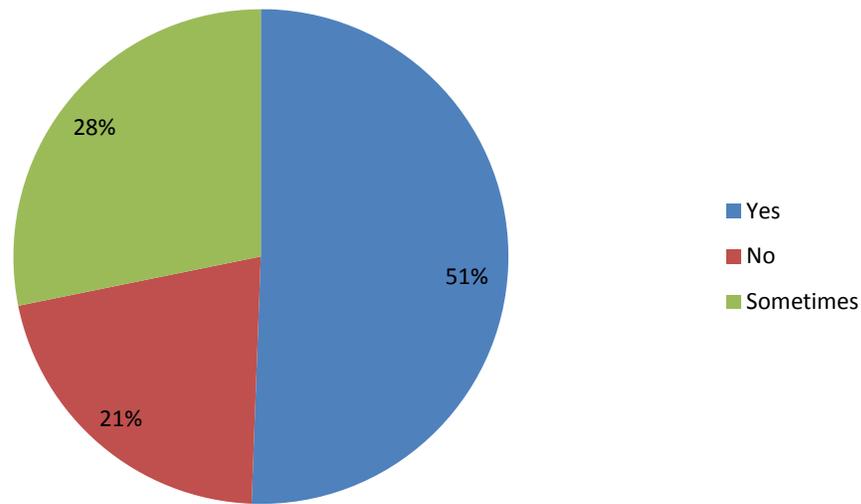
popular and visited troll page by the respondents is the International Chalu Union (ICU) with 38.2 percent of the respondents telling that visit these pages. Troll Malayalam is the second most popular troll page with 28.8 % suggesting it and Troll Republic is visited frequently by 6.5% of the respondents.

Do you produce trolls and memes?



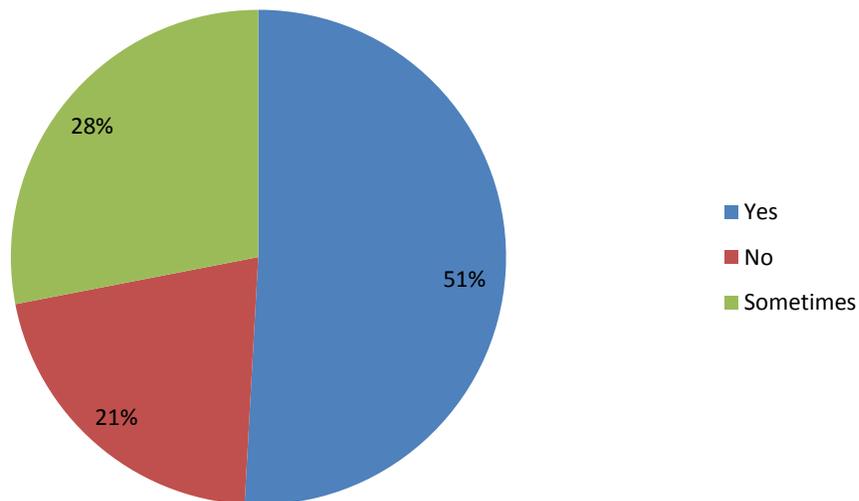
The chart shows while 87.6 percent of the responders tell that they have not made trolls and memes, 12.4 percent responded that they have made trolls and memes.

Would you fact check the content of trolls and memes?



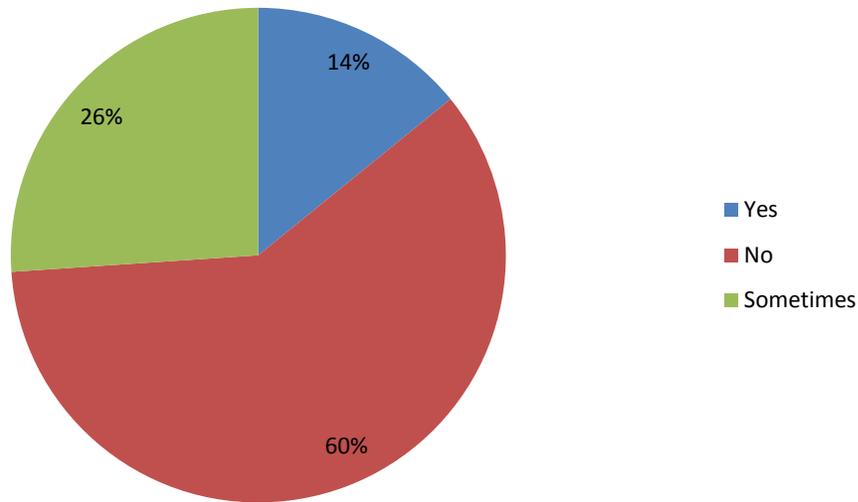
Fifty one percent of the responders agreed that they would check the factual information, whereas 21 percent of the respondents never check the factual accuracy of a troll and meme. The rest 28 percent said they would only check the accuracy of the information at times.

Do you share trolls and memes?



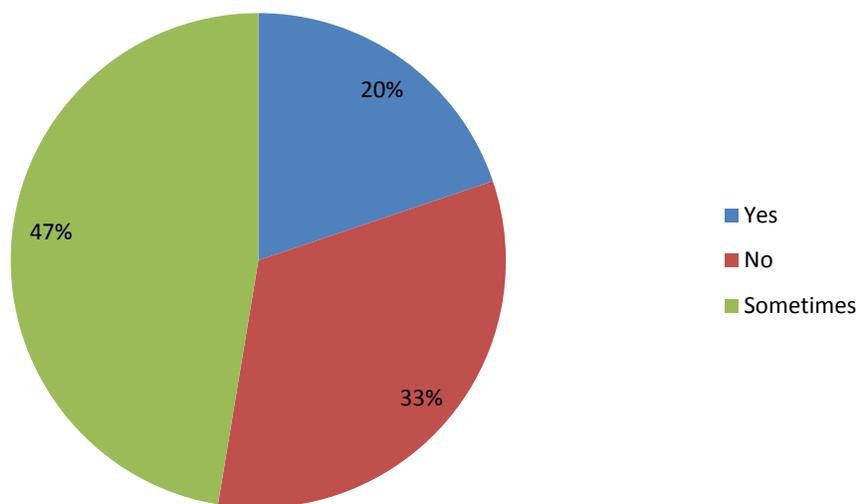
The data depicts that 51 percentage of the responders share the trolls and memes they see and 29 percent responded that they only share the trolls and memes sometimes. While 20 percent of the responders have not shared any trolls and meme.

Do you refer troll pages for news updates?



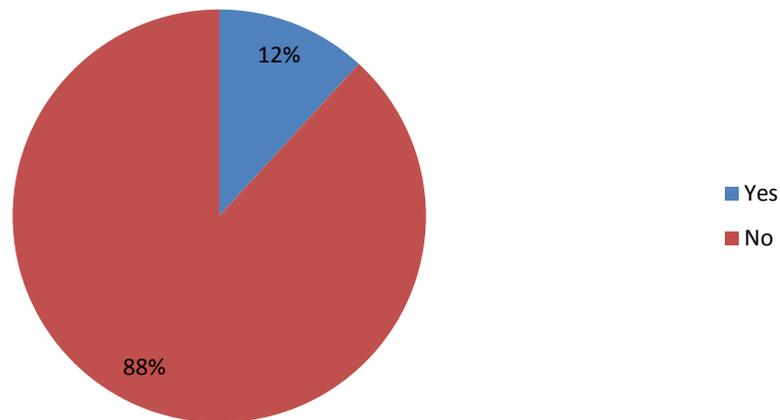
Data shows that 60 percentage of the responders do not refer troll pages for news updates 26 percentage responded that they sometime refer the troll for news and 14 percentage refer the troll for news updates.

Are troll pages becoming primary news source of mainstream media?



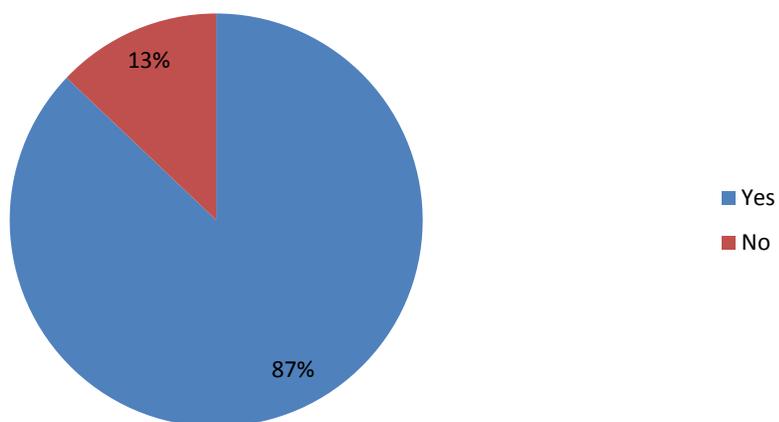
47 percentage of the responders said that sometime troll pages become the primary news source of main stream media. 20 percentage of the responders consider troll pages as the primary news source of main stream media.

Is it through troll you got the first information on Kudathai murder case?



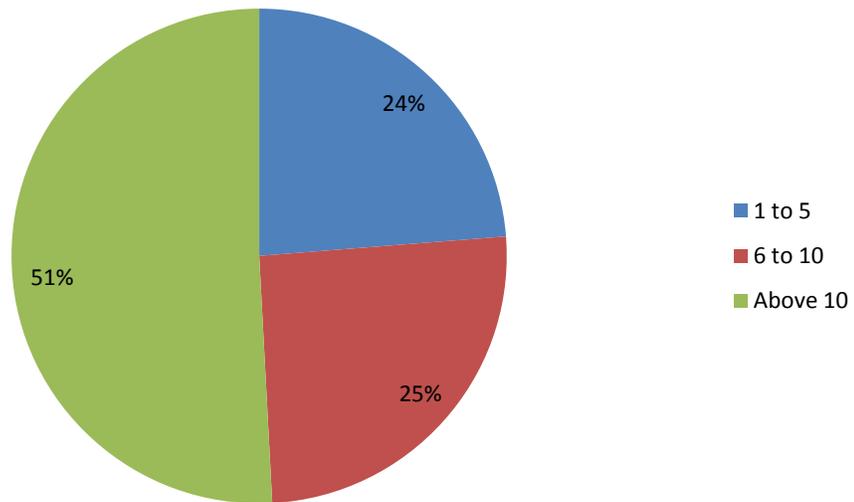
88 percentage of respondents said that it is not through troll they got the first information on Kudathai murder case and the other 12 percentage responded yes to the question.

Did you notice trolls and memes related to Kudathai Murder case?



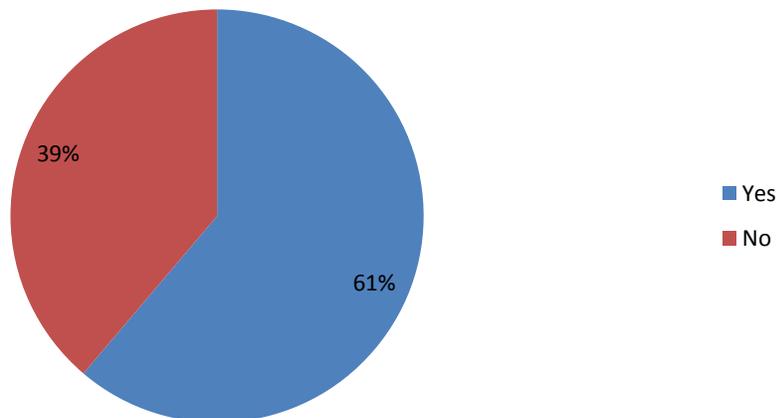
87 percentage of the population said that they have noticed the troll and memes related to Kudathai murder case and 13 percentage didn't notice the trolls related to that issue.

How many trolls and memes you have seen based on this issue?



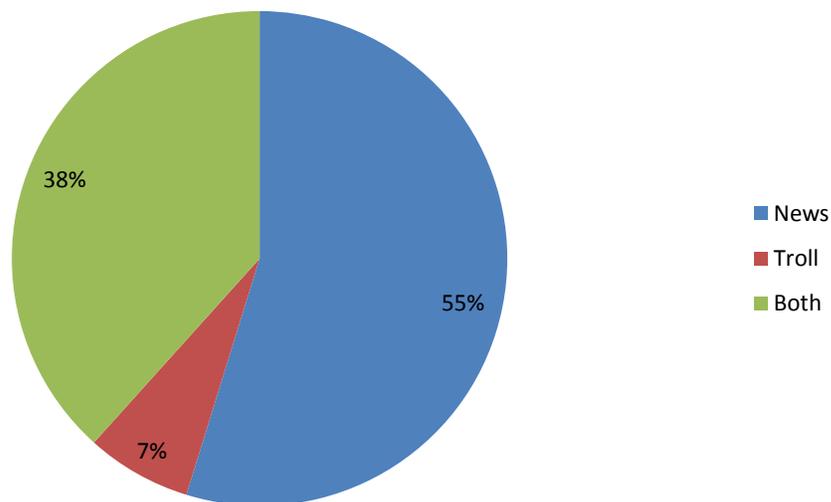
For the question of number of trolls and memes, 51 percentage said that they have seen more than ten trolls and memes related to Kudathai murder case, 25 percentage have seen six to ten trolls and 24 percentage responders saw one to five trolls.

Have you discussed trolls and memes on Kudathai murder case?



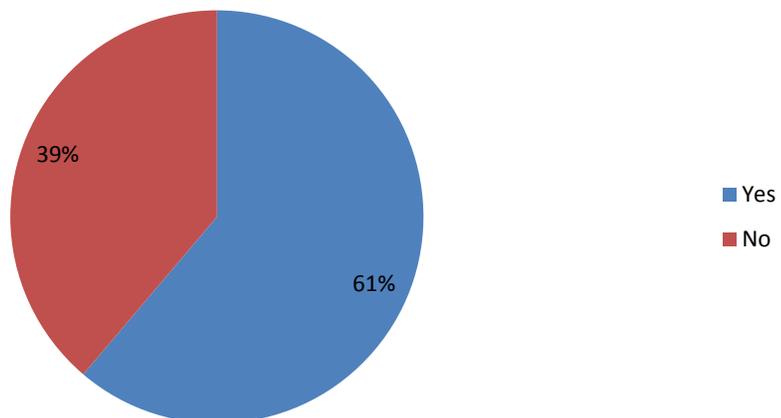
61 percentage of the responders said that they discussed the trolls and memes about Kudathai murder case and 39 percentage didn't discuss the issue.

Kudathai trolls or memes or its news, which one you discussed more?



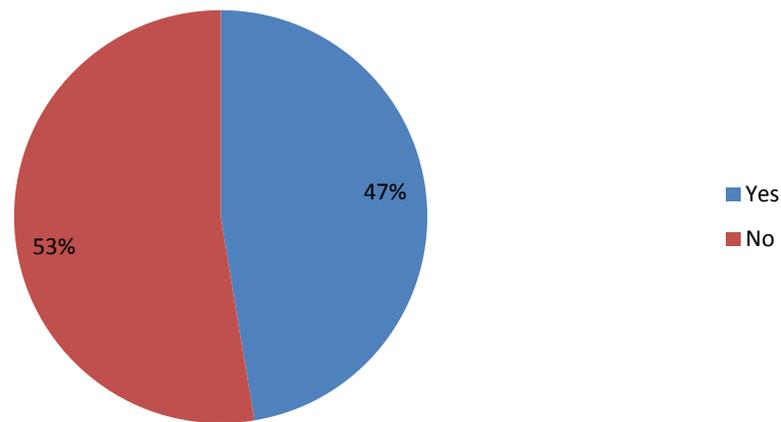
55 percentage of the responders discussed Kudathai news, 38 percentage discussed both trolls, memes and news and other 7 percentage discussed only troll related to Kudathai murder case.

Do you feel that trolls and memeshave lightened the criminal deeds?



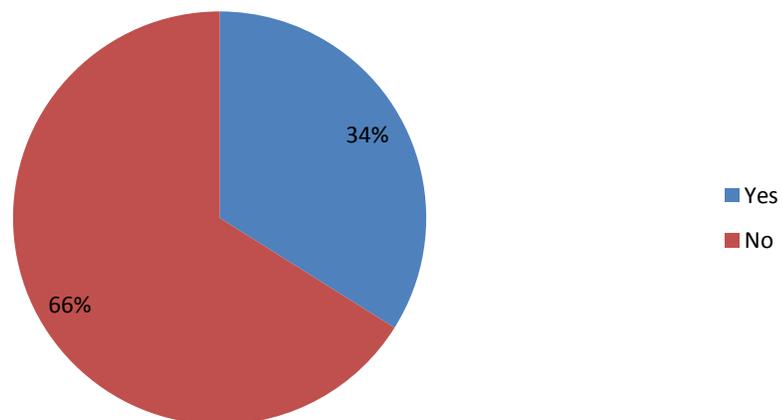
61 percentage of the responders felt that troll and meme has lightened the criminal deeds and 39 percentage did not felt troll has lightened the criminal deeds.

Do you feel that women are portrayed as negative through these trolls and memes?



53 percentage of the responders said that women are not portrayed as negative through these trolls and memes and 47 percentage felt that women are portrayed as negative through these trolls.

Do you think murder cases were celebrated through trolls and memes?



66 percentage of the population responded that murder cases were celebrated through trolls and memes and 34 percentage believed that murder cases were not celebrated through trolls.

4.2 Data Interpretation

101 responders among 170 are post graduate or above showing that the educated are keen on following the troll memes and news. 88 percentage of the responders watch or read troll and meme on a daily basis stating the influence of that same on them. 67 percentage of responders get new information from trolls and memes. Around 48 percentage responders believe that trolls and memes are useful for them. More than one-third of the sample responders answered that the trolls have the capacity to shape one's opinion. 87.6 percent responders under this study haven't made trolls or memes showing that people are interested to watch troll than making it. 51 percentage of the population share trolls and memes after the factual correction. 60 percentage people refer news over troll and meme. But 47 percentage were of an opinion that troll pages are the primary news source.

86.4 percentage of responders have said that troll memes are beneficial. They considered memes re instigates stereotypes and stigmas. There are also memes which make them think about specific incidents closely. In other words, there are memes which strike all human sense. Memes are more appealing because of the medium and the ways of portrayal.

Responders were of a view that most of the time trolls are updated, so get to know about incidents happening around. Trolls helped them to get new information and provided the humorous side of incidents.. Trolls provided simplified, impartial understanding on things happening around, that even mass media cautious to publish. Troll memes helped in portraying the actual situation and enabled to formulate the ideas and views based on it. Trolls were useful when it served the purpose of corrective criticism. Sometimes when an issue even unheard trolls helped to give an awareness on that matter. Trolls for responders was a mirror for the society. Trolls satirises the inefficient politicians and the persisting corruption. Trolls also helped to understand in detail about the viral news of the moment.

Taking into consideration of trolls on Kudatai murder case, we can understand that 87 percentage of the responders have seen the trolls and memes related to Kudathai murder case. This shows that majority of the responders have noticed the trolls and memes associated with the issue. 51 percentage have seen more than ten trolls on this issue stating that good amount

of trolls were circulated during that issue. 38 percentage have discussed both trolls, memes and news of Kudathai case. And among that 61 percentage believed that troll and meme has lightened the criminal deed. 47 percentage said that women were negatively portrayed through this trolls and memes 67 of the total population opined that murder cases were celebrated through the trolls and memes.

4.3 Findings and conclusions

Analyzing the response from the participants shows the attitude of netizens about trolls and memes and usage of both in communicating about homicide. The researchers have identified that trolls and memes have become a significant part of the life of an average Malayaleenetizen with a significant number of active netizens being exposed to troll pages every day. The research also finds that more than half of the samples consider trolls and memes as a source of new information which could influence the audience to form an opinion. The satirical and dark humorous presentation of an event through troll and meme is viewed as helpful by the audience to highlight the critical and alternative perspective of the realities of the society. Even though the research establishes that trolls and memes are a large part of today's internet sphere, most people do not trust the information put up in the troll page. It might be the reason why half of the respondents shared the trolls only after verifying the credibility of it. This study has not explored the relationship between these factors. Therefore, the study finds the troll pages in Malayalam have a long way to go and establish itself as a primary source of news.

The research identified that Koodathai murder was celebrated by the troll pages and memes in Kerala. Trolling a serious and violent crime of great magnitude had an adverse effect in portraying the reality. An analysis of the audience response shows that the use of humorous trolls and memes had lightened the severity of the crime. Such characteristic of trolling oversimplifies a complex issue which gives biased information to the audience. Further studies in the area could bring the correlation of information selection in troll pages and memes and the audience response. Even though trolls and memes highlight the opinionated information and fragmented information, Koodathai trolls and memes had pointed out the offender as cunning and devious. However, it had not led to generalization and portrayal of women in a negative light.

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